

## **NICKLE PLATE ABANDONED MINE POOL “BLOWOUT” WASHINGTON & ALLEGHENY COUNTIES, PENNSYLVANIA<sub>1</sub>**

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**Abstract.** On 01/25/05, a 10,000-gpm “blowout” of the century-old Nickle Plate Mine (Pittsburgh coalbed) occurred in a public sidewalk in McDonald, PA. The US Office of Surface Mining, first responder, installed diesel pumps and drain lines along public streets to control and convey the discharge to a nearby stream. On 02/22/05, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation issued a 90-day emergency contract to Environmentally Innovative Solutions, LLC to provide a permanent control. With numerous partners (federal, state, local agencies; local residents and businesses), property access and historical data were acquired, piezometers and test pits were installed, and mine pool response tests were conducted. After data evaluation, the mine pool was manipulated to discharge ½-mile northeast of the “blowout” on undeveloped land. By 05/20/05, a primary gravity drain, alternate drain, and continuous monitor at the “blowout” had been completed. Subsequent monitoring confirms the facilities are functioning as designed.

Additional Key Words: public-private partnership, emergency contract.

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<sub>1</sub>Paper was presented at the 2006 National Association of Abandoned Mine Land Programs 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, September 25-27, 2006, Billings, MT.

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## Introduction

### Statement of Problem

At approximately 2:00 pm (EST) on 01/25/05, while utility workers were using hand-tools to determine if a water main leak was responsible for drainage along a public road, a catastrophic “blowout” of an abandoned mine pool in the Nickle Plate Mine occurred. The confined conditions of the mine pool created a “geyser” with an estimated flow rate of 10,000 gpm. The “blowout” location was at 135 Liberty Street, along the sidewalk, in McDonald Borough, Washington County, PA, just 20 miles south of Pittsburgh, PA.

The Nickle Plate Mine (ca. 1890s thru 1930s) in the Pittsburgh coalbed (Pittsburgh Fm., Monongahela Gp.) underlies more than a thousand acres and, based on interpretation of available underground mine mapping, is interconnected with upgradient abandoned underground and surface mines. At the “blowout”, the downdip mine workings, enlarged by roof collapse, were less than 10 feet below the ground surface.

### “First Response”



Figure 1. "Blowout" of the abandoned Nickle Plate Mine pool. Note flooding of Liberty Street, McDonald, PA. (01/25/05)

The initial responders, McDonald Borough Fire & Police Departments, Borough Council, PA Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP) Emergency Response team, and other local fire departments, constructed sandbag dikes, closed local streets (traffic control), evacuated some residents and assisted others with flooding issues. (See Fig. 1.) The PA DEP and the US Department of Interior Office of Surface Mining Pittsburgh Office (OSM) agreed that OSM would provide the short-term response and that the PA DEP Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation (BAMR) would address the issue long term.

Through the efforts of OSM, by 3:30 am (EST) on 1/26/05, an 8-inch and a 12-inch pump, both with about 1000 feet of discharge hose, had been installed to convey the degraded mine drainage to the nearest watercourse, Robinson Run, of adequate size. (Upstream of the discharge hose, Robinson Run, with total iron and aluminum content generally exceeding 40 mg/l and 20 mg/l, respectively, was devoid of aquatic life.) By 2/15/05, the 12-inch pump was removed as the estimated flow rate had decreased to ~4,000 gpm. By 2/18/05, OSM had installed two piezometers to monitor the mine pool.

### Approach to Long-Term Solution

On 2/22/05, a “90-Day” Emergency Contract EP 3555440000-05-01 was issued by BAMR to Environmentally Innovative Solutions LLC (EIS) to:

- Continue pumping at the “blowout” until implementation of a permanent solution;
- Develop cooperative efforts with local government, businesses, and residents;
- Compile and evaluate all available relevant, historical data;
- Develop a monitoring program to include the installation of piezometers;
- Evaluate monitoring data collected daily by BAMR;
- Determine and evaluate options;
- Design and construct an effective, economical, permanent or long-term solution to control the mine pool with minimal impact to the community.

BAMR selected EIS based upon the merits of the proposal, proximity to the McDonald area, ability to provide a wide range of technical expertise (including project design), and the capability to construct the project. (EIS consists of several member companies that offer “turn-key” environmental services to private industry, government agencies, and non-profit organizations.)

The BAMR approach stressed that open lines of communication were to be established among all agencies and stakeholders. Throughout the project both BAMR and EIS provided frequent (often daily) updates to representatives of McDonald Borough for dissemination to concerned residents. [In addition to state and federal emergency contact information, the ability to contact the construction team on a 24-hour per day basis was also provided.] While BAMR’s proactive approach to management placed an additional obligation on project managers, the open exchange of information and ideas resulted in the emergence and expeditious implementation of solutions.

One of the first tasks was to install and to monitor piezometers in order to characterize the mine pool. With an ongoing compilation of historical data (including abandoned mine maps provided by a local landowner/coal operator) and with construction and continual revision of a Bed Map with contours (2-foot interval) drawn at the Pittsburgh coalbed/seathearth contact, the team worked with PA One Call to try to locate underground utilities and with the McDonald Borough Council and property owners for access and to avoid historical features (such as



Figure 2. Piezometers installed as part of hydrogeologic investigation. (03/10/05-photo by Rich Beam, BAMR)

the brick streets). Fourteen air-rotary boreholes were drilled by McKay & Gould Drilling (Darlington, PA) with eight piezometers installed into the mine workings (7 in voids) from 03/09 to 03/11/05 in or near the streets of McDonald. (See Fig. 2.) All boreholes and piezometers were located by the BAMR survey crew. On 03/23/05, pumping at the “blowout” was suspended and a 24-Hour Mine Pool Response Test was conducted by BAMR and EIS with water levels measured at specified intervals at the “blowout” and within the piezometers, including two installed by OSM. A map depicting the water level change (0.1 foot contour interval) was constructed to indicate possible areas for relocation of the mine water.

On 03/31/05, nine options were presented to BAMR regarding implementation of a permanent facility to control the mine pool through gravity drainage. One option “suggested” by comparing the historical underground mine mapping, Bed Map, and 24-Hour Mine Pool Response Test was to control the mine drainage in an area about ½-mile northeast of the “blowout”. This undeveloped area offered a number of potential advantages including (1) minimal impact to the local community, (2) lower construction costs due to the lack of infrastructure typically associated with densely-populated areas, and (3) available construction area for the future implementation of a passive treatment system. (Construction area for future treatment facilities was not available at other option locations.) Based on a consensus with BAMR, this option was further evaluated. BAMR reviewed the Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Index database which indicated that there were no threatened or endangered species; consistent with the disturbed nature of the site. The receiving stream was determined to have existing impacts from historical mining and the proposed pumping activities would result in impacts that were only short-term and minor. No historical or cultural resources were noted. In addition, wildlife, vegetation, air quality, and noise resources were reviewed with actual and anticipated impacts being no more than short-term to moderate.



Figure 3. Test pits excavated with pumping conducted to determine favorable locations for Primary and Secondary Drains. (04/08/05)

Landowner permission was received to install and monitor piezometers and test pits and to construct the necessary drainage systems, if the option was deemed feasible. On 04/01/05 and 04/05/05, thirteen boreholes were drilled with five additional piezometers installed (3 in voids) with the boreholes located by the BAMR survey crew. The site was inspected for subsidence features and siphons were installed to drain existing impounded degraded surface water. On 04/08/05, four test pits were excavated and pumping at the “blowout” was suspended. On 04/09/05,

pumping was conducted and then a temporary gravity drain was installed at Test Pit 1. Subsequent monitoring of the piezometers, Test Pit 2 and the “blowout”, indicated successful control of the elevation of the mine pool at the “blowout”. (See Fig. 3.) Monitoring on 04/09/06 through 04/13/06, a period without precipitation events, indicated that the elevation at Test Pit 1 needed to be maintained about 1½’ lower than the target elevation at the “blowout” during that time period.

BAMR continued frequent inspections and daily monitoring. Initially, the mine pool was to be maintained at an elevation to allow perpetual inundation while providing an adequate amount of “freeboard” to inhibit any unplanned discharge at the “blowout” location. BAMR also considered maintaining inundation of the underground mine workings in order to reduce weathering of the remaining pillars, as significant portions of the community (numerous dwellings, public roads, and utilities) were less than 35 feet above the mine workings. Drilling indicated, however, small local “rolls” in the coal with a difference in elevation of up to nine feet within a few hundred feet horizontally. A consensus was reached between BAMR and EIS that the goal was to maintain the mine pool at the “blowout” about five feet below the ground surface.

The data collected during continuous pumping at the “blowout” (24 hrs/day; 7 days/wk) as the mine pool elevation was being lowered ~0.1 ft/day from 03/04/05 to 03/16/05 (only short interruptions for minor maintenance and refueling) was analyzed in order to develop the target design flow rate for the permanent solution. Based on this information, the target design flow rate was estimated to be about 1,000 gpm.

A “design-build” proposal with cost estimate was submitted to BAMR for review on 04/18/05. On 04/26/05, BAMR provided comments to EIS and, on 04/27/05, a pre-construction meeting was held and measures were taken to protect adjoining property from rising water levels in the receiving watercourse. On 04/29/05, the final design proposal was submitted to Bruce Leavitt, PE, PG, Consulting Hydrogeologist, for review and, based on a consensus among BAMR, Leavitt, EIS, and the property owner, the permanent facilities were installed.

### **General Description of Permanent Facilities**

Paramount to site design considerations was public health and safety followed by effectiveness, community impact, long-term maintenance requirements, installation cost, and finally, aiding future work including grouting to address mine subsidence issues and treatment of the discharge. In order to achieve the ultimate project goal of providing a permanent, low-maintenance, non-pumping conveyance for the drainage to a receiving stream previously impacted by abandoned mine drainage, three hydrologically-related facilities at difference locations were constructed as listed in Table 1.



**Table 1. Permanent Facilities**

<b>Facility</b> (Designed & Built)	<b>Location</b> Receiving Stream (quality) Municipality, County Latitude/Longitude
<b>Primary Drain</b> (05/02/05 - 05/05/05) (05/13/05 - 05/19/05)	<b>Aloe Family Ltd. Partners property</b> “Alexander Run” (AMD degraded) North Fayette Twp., Allegheny Co. 40.37844774/-80.23009914
<b>Secondary Drain</b> (05/06/05 - 05/09/05)	<b>Aloe Family Ltd. Partners property</b> “Miller Run” (AMD degraded) North Fayette Twp., Allegheny Co. 40.37631529/-80.23032449
<b>Early Warning System</b> (05/06/05 - 05/09/05)	<b>135 Liberty Street (at “blowout”)</b> Robb Run (min. degradation) McDonald Boro., Washington Co. 40.37269150/-80.23388143

### Primary Drain

Design. The Primary Drain was installed at the location of Test Pit 1, which was excavated in a subsidence feature. Based on reorienting and interpreting historical underground mapping, Test Pit 1 was in the vicinity of a backfilled drift entry.

At the inlet, flow is intercepted and conveyed by the following three components: (1) three, 8” perforated pipes placed about 26 feet into the mine void, (2) an 18” perforated vertical riser with 18” perforated barrel, and (3) a non-calcareous, R-4, (6” average diameter) rock drain. The vertical riser allows monitoring and access for future pumping, if needed, and is protected by a concrete manhole with a bolted access cover, having a single 1” perforation to allow for manual water level measurements and venting of gases, if present. The inlet area was backfilled with R-4 rock with geotextile fabric used for layer separation of select onsite fill. Where appropriate, the area was graded and revegetated.

At the outlet, a rectangular concrete structure (4’W x 5’H x 13’L) set on two concrete footers with wing-walls to function as “anti-seep” features, includes a “weir-like” water level control feature that facilitates limited mine pool elevation manipulation (maximum ~5’) as well as relatively accurate flow rate estimations. The structure is covered with a concrete lid (6’W x 9’L) to deter unauthorized entry. Locking and hinged grating was placed immediately above the weir



Figure 4. Primary Drain online May 20, 2005. (06/16/05)

for access to manipulate the mine pool, if needed, as well as continued monitoring. A stilling well with datalogger facilitates water level measurements and a riprap-lined (R-4) channel conveys the discharge to a previously degraded stream. (See Fig. 4.)

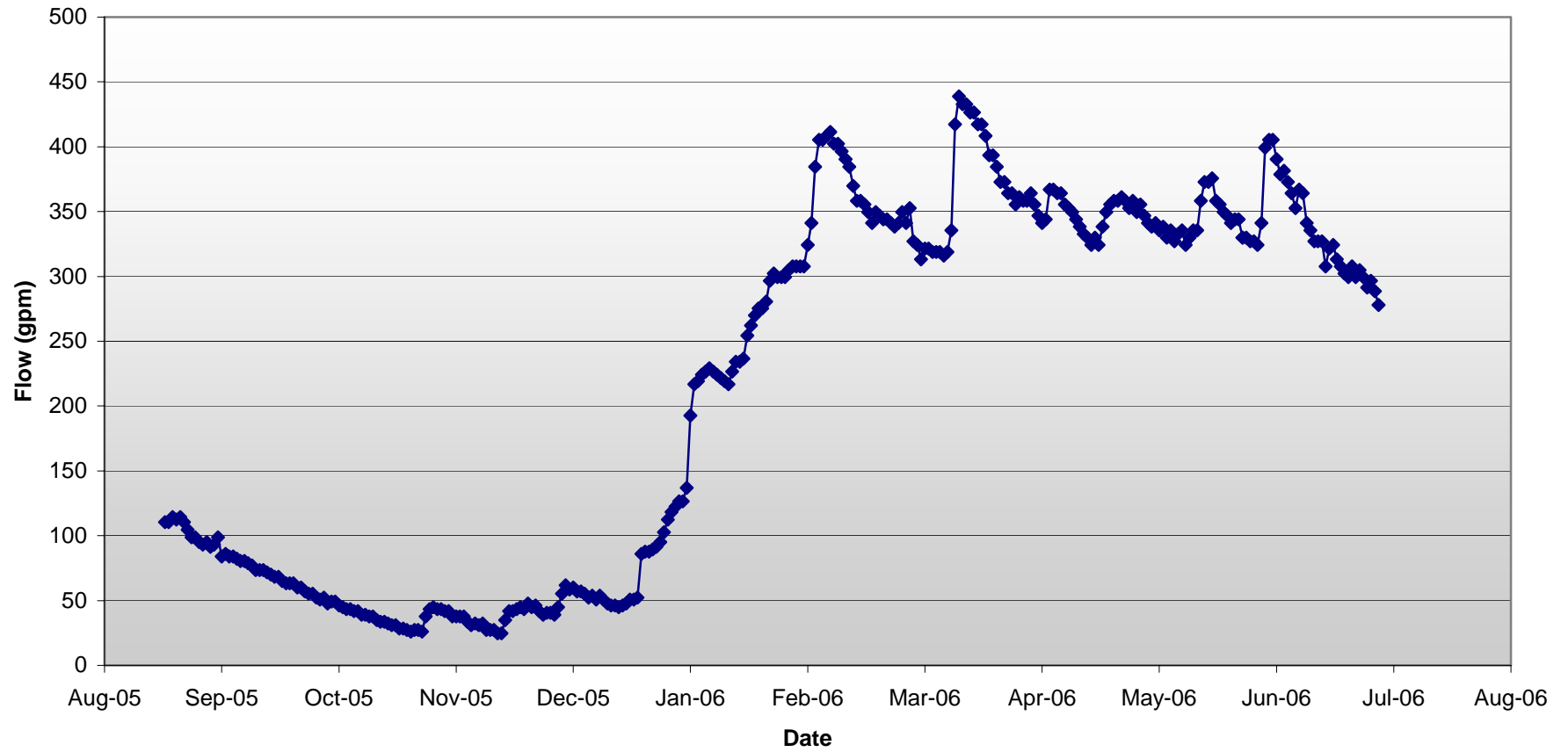
Hydraulic Capacity. Each of the three pipes extended into the mine void has two sections (~13' ea) perforated with a row (along pipe circumference) of five holes (1" dia.) every 6½" (~240 perforations/pipe; ~720 perforations total). Each of the runs is plumbed to about 60 feet of solid pipe which extends to the concrete outlet structure. For the design flow of 1,000 gpm, the approximate head loss for the 8" piping, without taking into consideration the R-4 stone or perforated 18" riser and barrel, is as follows: Flow into perforations 0.0'; Perforated pipes into mine 0.2'; Solid pipe runs from mine void to outlet structure 0.3'; Total Head Loss 0.5'.

The 18" vertical riser from the bottom elevation at ~1034' to ~1048' at the top of concrete outlet structure is perforated with 48 rows of seven, 1" perforations every 3½" (~336 perforations). Assuming a design mine pool elevation at the Primary Drain of 1044.9', ~260 perforations in the vertical riser are within the saturated zone. Using an assumed head of 0.1', the capacity of the perforations is about 970 gpm. For the barrel extending from the riser to the outlet structure, using an assumed head based on a full 18" pipe, the barrel has a capacity of about 3,500 gpm. (The perforations at the given elevation are the flow-limiting factor; however, the first section of pipe extending from the 45° elbow towards the outlet structure is also perforated in a similar manner as the riser to allow additional water to enter the pipe.) To supplement the 3 runs of 8" pipe and the 18" riser and pipe, water can also be conveyed from the mine void through the R-4, non-calcareous, riprap to the concrete outlet structure.

Based on the estimated design flow of 1,000 gpm, a 3.0-foot wide, sharp-crested, rectangular-notch weir installed within the concrete outlet structure would have a head of about 0.4' using the Francis Formula for a fully contracted weir. (Note that due to the design of the concrete outlet structure and adjustable weir, the conditions are neither fully contracted nor fully suppressed, but rather partially contracted yielding calculated flow differences of ~2% at ~700 gpm and approach 8% for calculated flows ~4,300 gpm.) Measurements taken 06/16/05 with a temporary "test weir" were:  $L = 3.33'$  (weir length) and  $H = 0.25'$  (height of water above weir measured at stilling well). The calculated flow using the Francis Formula:  $3.33 H^{1.5} (L - 0.2H)$  was about 613 gpm (+/- about 2%).

The weir notch was cut into ½" Tivar installed on the upstream face of stainless-steel stoplogs, and, by using the 1,000-gpm design flow and calculated required head for the targeted mine pool elevation at 1046.2 feet at the "blowout", the crest of the weir was set at 1044.5 feet. (Note: With insertion of all stoplogs, the crest of the weir would be about 1047.5' feet. The Secondary Drain with an overflow pipe invert at about 1048' would discharge prior to draining at the "blowout".) The weir has a total maximum measurable depth of 1.3' for a maximum measurable flow rate of ~6,000 gpm. Flows in excess will be above the weir and additional calculations would be needed to estimate flow rate. Monitoring of the flow rate at the Primary Drain is ongoing. Figure 5 depicts the variations in flow rates.

Figure 5. Primary Drain Discharge Monitoring





## Secondary Drain

Design. The Secondary Drain, constructed in Test Pit 3 which was located in a subsidence depression that actively conveyed surface water into the mine, not only allows access for monitoring of the mine pool and for future pumping, if needed, but also provides an outlet for mine pool drainage should the Primary Drain be compromised or other significant hydrologic changes occur within the mine. The top of the riser is protected by a concrete manhole with

an access cover secured by bolts. The cover has a single 1" perforation at the center to allow manual water level measurements and venting of gases, if present. (See Fig. 6.)

An 18" riser pipe diameter was selected in order to facilitate a typical intake basket (~12 inches in diameter) for an 8" diesel pump suction line and to allow a reasonable annulus for flow within the riser. An 18" overflow pipe was included in the design to provide a "safety relief" for the mine pool. From a 45° WYE installed near the bottom of the riser, the 18" overflow pipe with 45° elbow was then installed in order to direct overflow to a constructed channel and eventually to "Miller Run", a stream historically degraded by AMD. (See Fig. 7.)



Figure 6. Subsidence depression intercepting "Miller Run" prior to Test Pit 3 excavation. (03/03/05)



Figure 7. Construction of Secondary Drain. Geotextile used for layer separation of aggregate and backfill. (04/13/05)

During the April 2005 investigation phase, the difference in elevation between the "blowout" and the Secondary Drain ranged from 0.8' to 1.3', which was less than the difference between the "blowout" and Primary Drain. For this reason, the overflow pipe crest elevation was set at 1048'. If the mine pool elevation would rise at the "blowout" to ~1049', about 3' below the ground surface at the "blowout", the Secondary Drain is expected to discharge. The overflow pipe diameter was selected to provide sufficient carrying capacity within the pipe at minimal flow depths for the given pipe gradient. The pipe and subsequent channel gradients were limited to about 1% based on topographic

constraints as well as significant shallow subsurface water encountered during the installation of the culvert under the access road.

Hydraulic Capacity: The vertical riser was perforated with 1" holes, 0.4' on-center, from the bottom of the riser extending upward 6' (~200 holes). Approximately 0.2' of head is required to pass about 1,000 gpm. With an 18" overflow pipe installed at a ~1% slope, a flow depth of about 0.4' within the pipe would be needed to convey 1,000 gpm.

### Early Warning System Design



Figure 8. Local resident and subcontractor Dave Menke assists in the installation of the Early Warning System at the "blowout". (05/09/05)



Figure 9. View of the manhole cover of the Early Warning System in the repaired sidewalk. (06/10/05)

This component allows for continued monitoring (datalogger installed) of the mine pool elevation at the "blowout" location, as well as an additional "safety relief" point that will discharge in the unlikely event that the mine pool elevation rises to ground level. The "blowout" was cleaned to the maximum extent practicable with a rubber-tired backhoe. A 15" SDR35 riser, with 1" and 1<sup>1/8</sup>" perforations (about 50% of each) on 6" centers spaced both vertically and horizontally, was set into the void. A short section (~6'L) of 6" SDR35 pipe perforated with five 5/8" holes every 6" was inserted "back into" the mine void as feasible and connected to the 15" riser below design water elevation. PADOT #3, non-calcareous, aggregate was placed around the pipe to the level of the bottom of the sidewalk. The top of the riser is protected with a cast-iron manhole access cover set in concrete with bolted lid. The lid was perforated with seven 1" holes to allow manual water level measurements. In addition to monitoring, this perforated cover will allow water to discharge in a highly visible area of a residential section of McDonald Borough. If this were to occur, the

local residents would be able to alert the proper authorities to implement corrective measures. (See Fig. 8 and 9.)

### **Final Remarks**

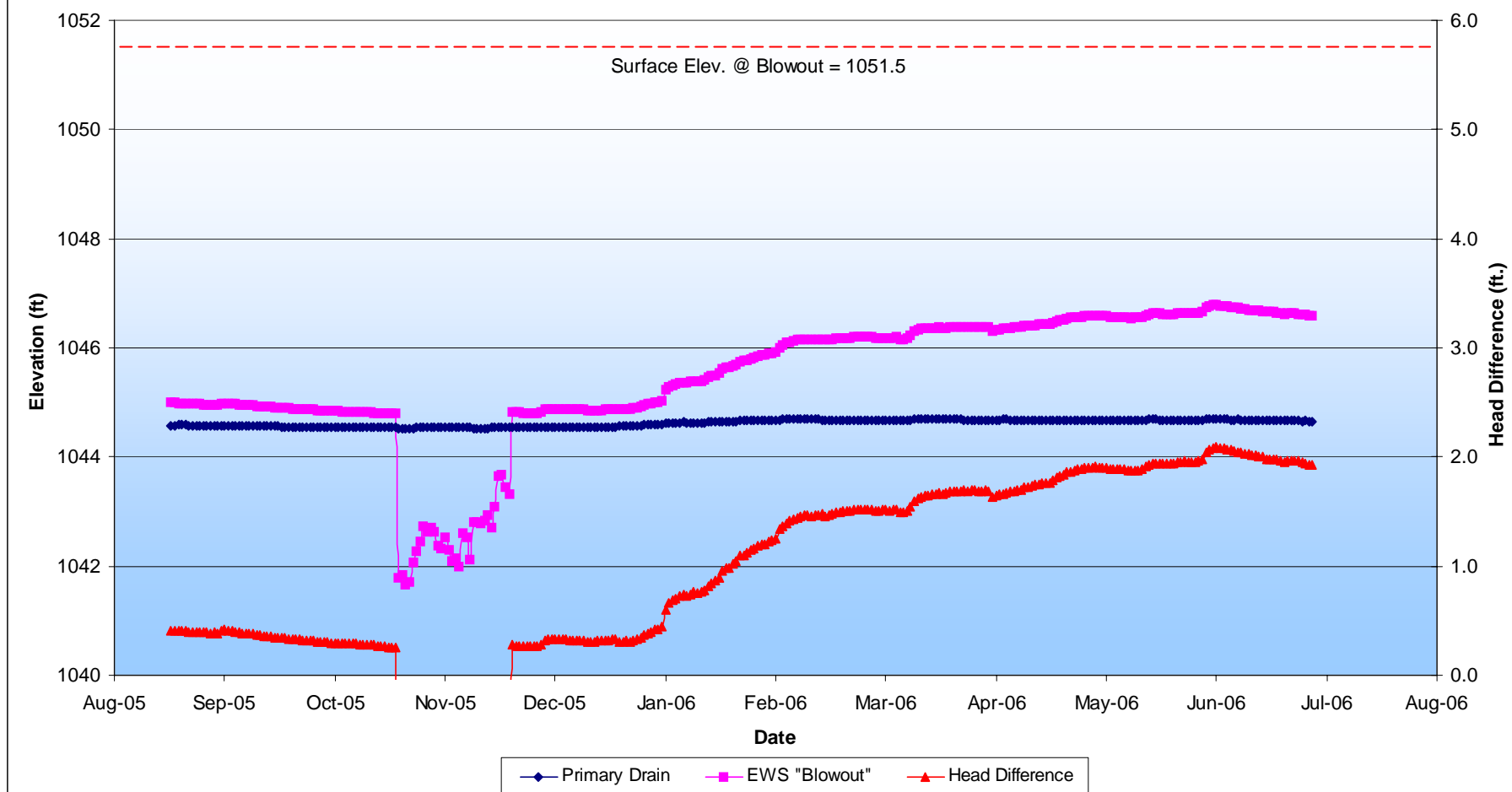
The cause of the “blowout” at McDonald is unknown; however, Hurricane Ivan (09/2004) is expected to have been an influence. More than a year after implementation, all systems appear to be functioning. (See Fig. 10.) The cost for project completion under the BAMR contract, including compilation of historic data, installation of piezometers, mine pool response tests, community outreach, and “design-build” of facilities was about \$400,000. Monitoring by BAMR is continuing. To date, no maintenance has been required at the Primary Drain or the “blowout”. The only maintenance was the removal of sediment (shoveled by hand) washed from upland areas that had accumulated at the pipe outlet of the Secondary Drain in 06/2006. Passive treatment is planned for the abandoned mine discharge in 2007/2008.

Public health and safety issues related to the mine pool “blowout” were substantial in McDonald Borough given the location in a densely populated area. As there are numerous “coal camps” that have become well-established communities throughout the Appalachian Coalfields, situations similar to the McDonald “blowout” are likely to become more frequent. The public-private partnership approach represented here may be one of the best options to resolving these issues.

### **Acknowledgements**

McDonald Borough Council and Police and Fire Departments; Ray Lardin, Rick Palmer, Rich Campbell, Jim Welsh, Dan Sammarco, Marty Hughes, Dale Stiffler, Mitchell Smith, Denny Lewis, PA DEP, BAMR; Steve Rathburn, Fred Sherfy, US DOI OSM; Eles Brothers Drilling; Aloe Family Limited Partners; Quality Aggregates Inc.; Lynn Gould, Mike Hollabaugh, McKay & Gould Drilling; Mark Slack, SPSI; PA One Call; David Menke; James Taborski; Rich Dolenc; Whitney, Bailey Cox and Magnani, LLC; Chester Engineers; Kehm Oil Company; Wayne Blumling; Frantangelos Gardens; Riverside Builders Supply; Poland Concrete Products, Inc.

Figure 10. McDonald Mine Pool Elevation Monitoring



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